

Citation:

Lowe, D.J. 2002. Lasting impressions from first conferences (with memories of H.S. Gibbs and others). In: J. Adams (ed.) 'Jubilee Reminiscences: Fifty years of soil science memories'. *New Zealand Society of Soil Science Occasional Publication* 3, 130-134.

Lasting impressions from first conferences (with memories of H S Gibbs and others)

David Lowe

The hijacking

I attended my first conference of the New Zealand Society of Soil Science in December, 1979. It was held at Telford Farm Training Institute near Balclutha, with John Bruce the chief organiser. With me from Waikato University was mentor Harry Gibbs, who had just retired. Perhaps the most enduring impression I have from the meeting was of the pervasive friendly and supportive atmosphere, a characteristic I have come to associate with all the Society's meetings I have since attended. In part this atmosphere is the result of the relatively small size of the Society's conferences. After I gave my talk, Phil Tonkin kindly took the time to point out several pedological features in the slides I had just shown, one being the evidence for tree overturn in a Kainui soil. This simple act has always remained with me because it showed that someone was interested in my work, which is very important for students feeling their way into the world of 'real' science. John Bruce was another who made an impression in a similar way. He was at the time putting the finishing touches to his report on the soils of Hamilton City (under the watchful eye of editor Rod Furkert). I was quite taken that he wanted to note some of my findings in his report which eventually appeared as a 'personal communication'. This demonstrated to me that undertaking re-

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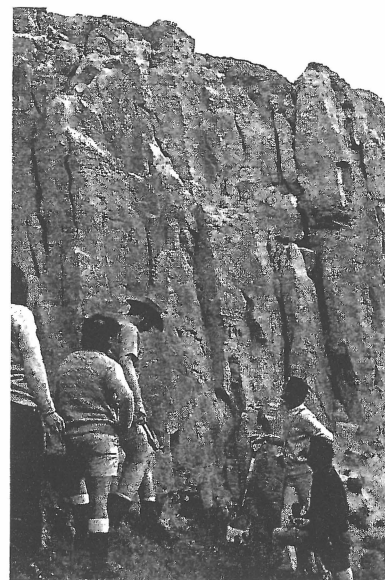


Professor Harry Gibbs (right) explaining the mysteries of soils and paleosols to first-year students on a Waikato University field trip in September, 1979. Harry was always patient and friendly in this role. The site, at Te Uku near Raglan, is the type locality for the Hamilton Ash sequence. (Photo: Rex Julian)

search was more than an exercise: it could lead to publication which was a very alluring siren.

Back to Harry Gibbs. Harry had a reputation as a hard taskmaster at times, and to an extent this was true in my experience. However, I always found him to be extremely fair-minded provided you understood his point of view, and I know that John McCraw valued greatly Harry's sound and apolitical advice in his administration of the Department. Appointed to a personal chair (professorship) in 1974, Harry's wide knowledge, patient approach and fatherliness endeared him to numerous undergraduate and graduate students, and I know he greatly enjoyed his lecturing role at Waikato. At the Telford conference, however, Harry wrote himself into the record books when he hijacked the bus on the mid-conference field trip. The trip was centred on land use in south-east Otago and the leader (I cannot recall his name) made what to Harry was a bad mistake in implying that the soils around us were suffering from accelerated erosion because current farming practices were unsuitable. Harry ordered the bus driver to pull over. He got out carrying a spade which he hurled like a javelin over a fence before climbing over and ascending part way up a nearby hill. Accompanying him were the leader (reluctantly) and several other bystanders, including me, wondering what was going to happen next. Harry dug a shallow pit and then defied the leader to find any mottles or other evidence of perching in the upper subsoil (he couldn't). Back on the bus Harry took the microphone and gave what I thought was a fairly reasoned and balanced explanation of what he'd seen and that the (alleged) mistake was one of erroneously transferring experience from a region of fragipan-bearing Pallic Soils (southern Yellow-grey Earths) to one of Brown Soils (southern Yellow-brown Earths). Judging from the muttering around me, quite a few were rather put out by this hijacking. I kept quiet. Cyril Childs, Editor of Soil News at the time, later noted tactfully in his write-up on the conference that informal discussion on field trip issues had been 'catalysed by Harry Gibbs.' On another day, John Bruce took a group of participants on an unscheduled evening trip to see some loess deposits and paleosols near Gore. There was sufficient daylight, even around 9 pm, to take photographs at this southerly (46°S) location.

Harry (actually christened Henry) was well known for his amazing memory and wide knowledge of soils and sites all over the country. Unquestionably he truly loved his soils and he was always happy to show them off to students (perhaps to the point of supersaturation, such was his desire for them to see what he saw). On one trip to the Bay of Plenty with Harry I remember we drove a fair distance out of our way to Mt Maunganui to get some date scones which were a favourite of his. I think he was probably a bit misunderstood (the hijacking incident says a lot) but I certainly learnt much from him that helped shape my own career. He was an absolute stickler in that any conclusion must be supported by evidence (or otherwise clearly identified as speculation): 'Where's the evidence?' or 'What's the basis of this state-



Impromptu evening field trip during the NZSSS Telford conference in December, 1979. Participants are admiring loess deposits at the type locality of the Stewarts Claim Formation near Waikaka in Southland. From left: Elwyn Griffiths, John Adams, Phil Tonkin (with characteristic hat), Roger Parfitt and John Bruce. (Photo: David Lowe)

ment?' he would ask (and woe betide you if you didn't have an appropriate response). He also insisted that scientific papers be written in plain English. 'Write simply!' he would demand. Another favourite line was, 'Don't pull rabbits out of the hat'. By this Harry meant that all the conclusions should derive from the preceding results and discussion, and not appear as a surprise. Despite his training in chemistry, Harry was an ardent field man who viewed some of the new 'black box' approaches being used in tephra and other studies with a slightly suspicious eye. He could easily unsettle you simply by asking, for example, 'How do you *know* it's tephra X?' (you soon learned to ask these questions of yourself before Harry did). Harry enjoyed a moment of supreme satisfaction when George Walker, eminent volcanologist, gave our department a spellbinding talk ca. 1980 on his groundbreaking findings regarding the Taupo eruption. At the end Harry was quite elated because, as he rightly pointed out, all George's new interpretations had been made on the basis of 'just a spade, a few sieves and fieldwork'.

On the topic of conservation, Harry's viewpoint was very balanced, seeing the need for development alongside the need to preserve. He used to say: 'I put it to you that this pastoral landscape [of the Waikato] is no less attractive than a forested landscape'. With the rise of the conservation movement in the 1970s, this view went against the grain for many but Harry realised the need for production to generate the country's wealth but at the same time appreciated that conservation estates were essential as well. Should a conflict arise, his priority was always people, a reflection probably of his Catholicism as much as anything.

Shootout at Pumpkin Pit

The first international conference I attended was the 'Soils with Variable Charge' conference held at Massey University in February, 1981. Bruce Miller chaired the organising committee and Les Molloy was the hard-working Secretary-General. Numerous other members of the Society were also involved. A group of Chinese



Republic of China delegation at 'Soils with variable charge' conference at Massey University in February, 1981. (Photo: David Lowe)

scientists attended the conference, which at the time was remarkable and novel because the Cold War was still in progress, albeit thawing. I thought the conference was outstanding, one innovation being the emphasis on poster papers as the main mode of presentation. There were only 18 invited oral papers and some of these reviewed various aspects of variable charge soils (e.g. mineralogy, chemistry, etc.). The reviews and ensuing audience discussion, plus discussion group reports, were written up in the proceedings (edited by Peter Rankin and Jock Churchman). Prior to the meeting, Benny Theng had edited the benchmark book 'Soils With Variable Charge', which was published by the Society for the conference. I was scheduled to give an oral paper and I well recall breaking out in a cold sweat when the opening speaker, Dick Arnold, gave an informative review of the morphology of soils with variable charge. His easy going yet (typically American) lucid style, plus the company of dozens of 'big name' scientists all around me, had me feeling rather vulnerable and wondering if I'd be able to stand up, let alone speak coherently when my turn came. In the event I managed to get through my talk OK but the first question, from none other than the famous Koji Wada of Japan, did not help my nerves. I was happier to meet up with Koji Wada subsequently at the International Clay Conference in Adelaide in 1993 where he paid me probably the highest compliment I'm likely to receive in my career when he told me that a book chapter I wrote in 1986 had 'changed our thinking'.

Part-way through the conference we went on a local tour. I hung around a group of Dutch scientists, including Wim Sombroek from Wageningen, who impressed me mightily with his fluent knowledge of pedology and 'Soil Taxonomy'. He and others dissected soil profiles reciting likely diagnostic horizons and soil orders with apparently little effort. I thought at the time that I'd have to get more into 'Soil Taxonomy'. The Wageningen scientists brought with them a slim cut-and-paste version of the 1975 edition of 'Soil Taxonomy', and I subsequently used this in classes until the 'Keys' started to emerge. On the tour I carefully focussed and photographed a dozen or more sites and soils, only to discover that I had foolishly forgotten to load a film in my camera.

I participated in the ten-day North Island field trip, which ran both before and after the conference (Derek Milne and Roger Parfitt led the pre-conference and Jim Pollok and Brent Clothier the post-conference tour; others joined as day leaders). I recall Roger Parfitt telling us about his new 'rule of thumb' that amazingly allowed allophane content to be quantified ('Multiply the Tamms silicon value by about seven or eight', I have recorded in my notes). Various incidents stick in my mind, one being the breakdown of the bus at Whangamomona of all places on the post-conference tour. I had left the tour earlier at New Plymouth, flying home to be with my soon-to-be fiancée, but heard later that the tour party enjoyed a wonderful day on an adjacent farm whilst waiting for bus repairs. The farmer provided a swimming pool, farm tours and shearing demonstrations, test cricket and

plenty of drinks. The tour eventually reached the Chateau Tongariro very late that evening. Jim Pollok made a strong impression on me in the way he organised the discussion at each soil pit. I have adopted his approach ever since because it is especially useful in environments where both upbuilding and topdown pedogenesis are operating. Firstly, Jim let all the photographers get in and take their photos without hindrance. Then he worked through the soil stratigraphy and parent material(s) from the bottom up. Next, he worked his way down the solum discussing the horization, evidence of various pedogenic processes, and so on. Finally, he concluded with the classification, which brings me to the 'shootout'. The tour group was at a small disused quarry near Hamilton known colloquially in our Department as 'Pumpkin Pit'. The group was gathered around edge of a soil pit, engrossed in the properties of the Horotiu sandy loam. I became aware of a heated discussion taking place behind us, the protagonists being Mike Leamy and Harry Gibbs (again). Unbelievably, they almost came to blows over which classification system should be mentioned first. Harry was adamant that the soil should be classed first using the New Zealand Genetic Classification on the grounds that we were in New Zealand. Mike was equally adamant that 'Soil Taxonomy' should be used first because the tour was part of an international meeting in which 'Soil Taxonomy' was the stated 'language' of preference. Both had valid viewpoints but were immovable. I can't remember who 'won' the shootout but I suspect things went the way of 'Soil Taxonomy'.



North Island tour group of 'Soils with variable charge' conference in February, 1981, examining Horotiu sandy loam near Hamilton. In pit is Gary Orbell; sitting on its edge are Jim Pollok (facing Gary) and Malcolm McLeod(?) and Mike Leamy (jersey around shoulders). Behind Jim is Ben Clayden (crouching, striped T-shirt), from England, who joined Soil Bureau shortly after. (Photo: David Lowe)